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## From Preschool to Prison: How School Resource Officers Produce Criminality

Brenda Vargas Tapia  
*San Jose State University*

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# From Preschool to Prison: How School Resource Officers Produce Criminality

## Abstract

Police officers were introduced in the American school system to provide White communities with a sense of safety. However, these police officers are not well trained to provide students with support and instead are trained to deal with situations with force. The implicit bias of police officers criminalizes and punishes Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students unfairly. School shootings have continued to enforce the idea that officers are needed. However, this notion is untrue. Policing in schools builds a school-to-prison pipeline that is now, in the online schooling era, translating to the Zoom-to-prison pipeline, which reveals that BIPOC youth live in a carceral state where they do not need physical school buildings to be castigated. The case study of San Jose emphasizes the need to invest in BIPOC rather than invest in School Resource Officers (SROs). Schools across the nation must cease their SRO program contracts with their local police department and invest in much-needed resources instead. People with privilege must step up and work towards dismantling the structures and racist ideologies that fuel the injustices towards BIPOC youth in schools. Investing in other resources, such as mental health resources, will cultivate a healthy school environment, removing the need for police officers. Current harmful injustices must be abolished in order to change the structure of education and provide a joyful and rigorous education to BIPOC youth.

## Keywords

education, criminalization, race, police officers, school resource officers, BIPOC

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**Abstract**

Police officers were introduced in the American school system to provide White communities with a sense of safety. However, these police officers are not well trained to provide students with support and instead are trained to deal with situations with force. The implicit bias of police officers criminalizes and punishes Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students unfairly. School shootings have continued to enforce the idea that officers are needed. However, this notion is untrue. Policing in schools builds a school-to-prison pipeline that is now, in the online schooling era, translating to the Zoom-to-prison pipeline, which reveals that BIPOC youth live in a carceral state where they do not need physical school buildings to be castigated. The case study of San Jose emphasizes the need to invest in BIPOC rather than invest in School Resource Officers (SROs). Schools across the nation must cease their SRO program contracts with their local police department and invest in much-needed resources instead. People with privilege must step up and work towards dismantling the structures and racist ideologies that fuel the injustices towards BIPOC youth in schools. Investing in other resources, such as mental health resources, will cultivate a healthy school environment, removing the need for police officers. Current harmful injustices must be abolished in order to change the structure of education and provide a joyful and rigorous education to BIPOC youth.

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## Introduction

The criminalization of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) begins in the school system. The increasing media attention that resulted from the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor has led the movement to push the police out of schools. However, the Black Lives Matter movement has demanded the removal of police in schools since its establishment in 2013. School systems have created a culture of punishment by utilizing “zero-tolerance” policies that criminalize students for minor offenses of school rules. Many believe that police officer presence on school campuses equates to safety, but this is untrue. Although some people believe that police presence in schools discourages students from misbehaving, policing does not deter crime; instead, it disproportionately penalizes Black, Brown, and Indigenous students because they are viewed and treated as suspects rather than human beings. Police officers are ill-equipped to address behavioral issues because they are trained to be authoritative and react to a situation using force; they are not trained to respond to a situation in an authentic manner. The majority of school funding goes towards policing rather than hiring more teachers, counselors, nurses, or social workers, which are resources that would benefit students. School districts across the nation must terminate their contracts with law enforcement to allocate funding towards much-needed resources. Thus, allowing BIPOC students not only to survive but also to thrive. This paper analyzes the effects of policing in schools in order to prove that School Resource Officers (SROs) reinforce the school-to-prison pipeline by unjustly criminalizing Black, Brown, and Indigenous students, and school districts across the nation must entirely cease their relationship with law enforcement.

### **The Establishment of Policing in Schools**

Police officers were first introduced to the American school system during desegregation. Though the landmark decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) declared that “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” White communities opposed the integration of schools and continued to segregate schools. White residents protested the integration of schools because they believed Black, Brown, and Indigenous children would bring lawlessness into the classroom, disrupting and hindering their White children from learning. It was not until after civil rights leaders dismantled de jure segregation laws that the desegregation of schools advanced. The Civil Rights Act (1964) “authorizes the federal government to file school desegregation cases” and “prohibits discrimination in programs and activities, including schools, receiving federal financial assistance.” The Civil Rights Act integrated more schools, but White communities were still reluctant as they deemed youth of color as “delinquents,” “undesirables,” and capable of “corroding school morale” (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 3). Therefore, to keep White residents feeling safe during the integration of schools, school districts began establishing relationships with law enforcement (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 4). School administrators claimed that law enforcement would deter violence between White and non-White students in integrated schools. School districts across the nation began to establish relationships with law enforcement. In 1966, the school district in Tucson, Arizona established a relationship with their police department and ordered police officers to patrol six junior high school campuses (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 4). Other cities quickly followed, and by 1972, “urban school districts in 40 states had law enforcement patrolling on their school campuses” (Marcelin &

Hinger, 2017, p. 4). In an effort to keep their White communities safe, police officers patrolled the grounds of education centers.

To justify the implementation of more police officers on school grounds, initiatives of implicit bias were formed. As if the mere presence of law enforcement on school campuses was not enough to subjugate BIPOC youth, by the 1960s, programs intended to “prevent future crime” expanded across the country under the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act of 1968 (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 5). To prevent future crime in schools, teachers and school administrators classified youths as “delinquent” or “potentially delinquent,” despite the lack of a history of misbehavior (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 6). The terms “delinquent” and “potentially delinquent” did not have specific definitions, but many school districts attributed these terms to behaviors of “short attention spans . . . [and] quick temper[s]” (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 7). The classification caused preconceived notions of criminality among Black and Brown students as young as nine-years-old. Identifying students as “delinquent” or “potentially delinquent” at a young age prompted teachers and school administrators to have an implicit bias towards these students and preconceive them as “red flags” even before getting to know them (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 5). Without a doubt, this initiative caused teachers and school administrators to lose faith in their students early on and dispose of them because they were expected to get absorbed into the juvenile justice system at some point in their lives. Attributing the terms “delinquent” and “potentially delinquent” to Black and Brown youth justified the implementation of more police officers on school campuses because it was believed that more police presence would prevent future crime from occurring.

However, crime continued to occur, and heinous school shootings exacerbated the belief that police officers belonged on school campuses and could prevent crime, but the implementation of School Resource Officer (SRO) programs are distorted. To prevent crime through “community policing,” the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 “allocated \$9 billion to increase the numbers of police officers on streets,” and these funds were managed by the federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (C.O.P.S.) (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 8). In response to the heinous school shootings, people demanded more police officers in schools beyond inner cities. To address these demands, in 1998, Congress allocated more funding to the C.O.P.S. in Schools initiative. In the legislation, Congress referred to police officers as “School Resource Officers” (SROs) and claimed that violence in schools was not restricted to inner cities and that schools were unsafe without police presence (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 8). Following the atrocious Columbine High School Shooting of 1999, President Clinton cited the first grants managed by C.O.P.S. to allow schools and law enforcement departments to form relationships with each other as to prevent “school crime, drug use, and disciplinary problems” (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 8). By 1999, “C.O.P.S. awarded 275 jurisdictions more than \$30 million for law enforcement to partner with school entities to address crime and disorder in and around schools” (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 8). To gain support on the initiative of SRO programs in schools, lawmakers claimed that “school police would use tactics other than arrests and use of force” and that they “would develop or expand community justice initiatives and train students in conflict resolution” (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p. 8). However, this claim was false as police officers never received conflict resolution training (Marcelin & Hinger, 2017, p.

9). Though SROs did not receive adequate training to deal with behavioral issues, policing in schools became widely acceptable throughout time, and so did punitive measures against Black, Brown, and Indigenous youth, which established the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **The Dire Consequences of Policing in Schools**

#### **The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The school-to-prison pipeline is a term that describes how low-income youth of color are pushed out of public schools and into the criminal justice system (Heitzeg, 2009). Zero-tolerance policies were initially created to keep drugs and guns out of schools. However, these policies quickly extended to petty high school affairs such as students throwing tantrums, disobeying teachers, and school administrators, or fighting. Zero tolerance policies help maintain the school-to-prison pipeline because they mandate punitive measures, such as suspensions, expulsions, and in-school arrests, for minor or major infractions, disproportionately pushing BIPOC youth into or deeper into the criminal justice system. Suspensions and expulsions remove students from the classroom, causing them to fall behind on their coursework, resulting in getting held back a grade or dropping out of high school entirely. Furthermore, dropping out of high school makes you three times more likely to get arrested in the future (Sweeten, 2006, p. 463). Research reveals that a single suspension during the first year of high school doubles the likelihood of being a high school dropout, and those that are expelled are three times more likely to end up in the juvenile justice system (Scialabba, 2017). Once an individual is caught up in the juvenile justice system, the dire psychological and economic consequences can have a long-lasting and burdensome impact on youths that decreases their chances of continuing to pursue education and



being financially stable, further increasing the chances of reincarceration.

Policies and practices that uphold the school-to-prison pipeline impact BIPOC youth the most because they are criminalized at higher rates than their White counterparts. BIPOC students remain punished and criminalized at staggering rates for not adhering to White norms. Data from the Department of Education reveals that Black students are disproportionately disciplined starting at the age of three (Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Although there are fewer Black children enrolled in preschool, they are criminalized at higher rates. Black girls are six times more likely to be suspended than their White and male counterparts (Finley, 2017). In some cases, Black students have been disciplined for wearing their natural hair or speaking African American Vernacular English (A.A.V.E.) (Belsha, 2020). Black children are criminalized merely for the color of their skin. American schools continue to remove Black students from the classroom because of the biased notion that Black youth are problematic. In high school, compared to their White counterparts, Black students are three times more likely to be arrested, Latinx students are 1.3 times more likely, and Indigenous students are two times more (Whitaker, 2017). These statistics reveal that BIPOC youth are being racially profiled at their schools, which prevents him from learning and feeling safe. They also imply that BIPOC youth are viewed as disposable and not worthy of saving or educating. Schools continue to perpetuate a system that harms BIPOC youth.

Many schools that serve low-income BIPOC youth have adopted a prison-like environment where teachers and administrators are the guards, and the students are the prisoners. When schools invest in expensive metal detectors to make schools

"safer," students suffer because they do not have necessary school supplies such as pencils or updated textbooks. When comparing the demographics of school that have metal detectors to those that do not, there is a clear class and race divide: schools with metal detectors are often found in school systems with large amounts of BIPOC students, whereas schools located in White and affluent areas often do not have these systems set in place. There has been little evidence proving that metal detectors keep schools safe, and if they were, then why would not all schools adopt these machines? When students enter the school and are greeted by a metal detector and security guard, it makes students feel like they are in prison, which can mentally harm the youth. Schools also mimic a prison environment because the principals act like wardens, and teachers act like correctional officers. A lack of funding in education makes students feel violated by the system. Children's education is not being funded but creating a prison-like environment is.

Inadequate resources in public schools fuel the school-to-prison pipeline. Second-rate school environments which include "overcrowded classrooms, a lack of qualified teachers, and insufficient funding for guidance counselors, special education services, and textbooks" trap students and make them more likely to drop out (The Women's Law Project, 2012). This second-rate and prison-like environment disengages students, making them attend school only because they have to, not because they want to. Many underfunded public schools in inner cities have physically uninviting buildings that mimic a prison environment. Schools look like prisons because armed guards stand at school entrances. Students are forced to go through metal detectors upon entering, police patrol the vicinity, cameras surveil students, and sometimes students are subject to strip searches. Unreasonable searches and

seizures are humiliating, degrading, and a dreadful invasion of privacy. Approximately 14 million students attend schools with police but no counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, counselors, or adequate school supplies (Whitaker, 2017). Over policing and the scarcity of these much-needed resources means that American public institutions would rather police their students than provide them with quality education. Ultimately, American public institutions invest in setting their students up for failure instead of investing in ways to seek success.

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline in San Jose, CA**

San Jose, California fails to provide quality education and access to technology to BIPOC youth. Although community activists have strived towards dismantling the school-prison-pipeline in San Jose, its history shows a disparity between the way BIPOC youth are treated compared to their White counterparts. Even though schools in San Jose, California are at the heart of Silicon Valley, many schools lack technology resources such as updated laptops and Wi-Fi. In 2012, the East Side Union High School district, which is predominantly made up of low-income BIPOC youth, had more police officers on campus than guidance counselors (Shabad, 2016). The majority of its funding went towards SRO programs and cameras that surveil students instead of more teachers, classrooms, textbooks, desks, or maintenance issues such as fixing broken windows and ceilings. In the 2011-2012 school year alone, the district directed its students to the police 1,745 times (Shabad, 2016). This means that many students within the district were in desperate need of attention. However, instead of providing them with counseling for mental health, they were pushed into a cycle that overlooks their needs and instead penalizes them.

Despite calls from community activists, community members, and parents to end its relationship with the San Jose Police Department (SJPd), San Jose Unified School District (SJUSD) was reluctant. Although some school districts in San Jose are in the process of ending their contracts with law enforcement, one of their largest school districts withstands this idea. The Alum Rock Union and East Side Union High School districts decided to unanimously end their contracts with the San Jose Police Department in June 2020 (Martin, 2020). Ending those contracts issued a surplus of \$100,000 for the Alum Rock Union District and \$700,000 for the East Side Union District, all of which will be used to help compensate for the budget shortfalls caused by COVID-19 and state funding cuts (Gao & Qiao, 2020). The SJUSD, which currently serves over 30,000 students, annually distributes approximately one million dollars of its budget on police officers and law enforcement services provided by the SJPd (Gao & Qiao, 2020). Amid the plea from community members and local activists to terminate their contract with the SJPd, SJUSD has stated that they will maintain their relationship with SJPd because they believe that police officers “maintain a sense of community” in their schools (Webeck, 2020). However, investing in SRO programs deprives BIPOC youth of their success.

School districts in San Jose can maintain a sense of community without SRO's, and make schools feel safer and liberating. Expressing their discontent with SROs on campus, a high school student from San Jose delivered the following statement:

I feel uncomfortable with SROs on campus. I experienced constant harassment and monitoring at Silver Creek High School from 2017-2019. The administration and police

worked together to always profile me and my friends. It made me uncomfortable. They always kept an eye out on me. This creates a hostile environment. They only follow me and my friends to see if I'm doing anything bad. They keep tabs on us and watch us inside and outside of school. (De-Bug Youth Organizers, 2020)

This testament reveals that students do not feel safe in the presence of police officers. Students are often intimidated by police officers and do not want them to roam their school campuses and make them feel like they are under constant watch. Safety is “the condition of being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury” (Merriam-Webster's Dictionary). Schools should be safe for BIPOC youth but are not because they are constantly punished and surveilled; zero tolerance policies also make students more susceptible to risk and injury by the police. Policing and surveillance are rooted in racist beliefs, and these practices can put youth at risk for violence and mental health disorders, such as anxiety and depression. Institutions of learning cannot have police officers roaming the campus grounds because it is intimidating and makes it difficult for students to learn. SRO programs enforce early law enforcement contact, thus making students more susceptible to getting trapped in the criminal justice system at a young age.

As the largest school district in San Jose, SJUSD must cease its contract with the SJPd to provide a more joyful and rigorous education for its students. Derrick Sanderlin is a community activist that used to provide new San Jose police officers with implicit-bias and procedural-justice training (Noyes, 2020). However, he was shot by the police and was seriously injured for peacefully protesting and trying to de-escalate tensions at a George Floyd protest in San Jose on May 29, 2020 (Noyes, 2020).

A resolution calling SJUSD to stop investing in SRO programs and instead invest in the students in San Jose was named after Sanderlin. The Derrick Sanderlin Resolution seeks to address the racist history of school policing by replacing punitive discipline with restorative justice practices, implementing an ethnic studies curriculum, providing holistic student health services, and investing in a community-created district safety plan (Vera, 2021). Though this resolution has received community support, SJUSD remains reluctant to cease its contract with SJPd By not passing this resolution, SJUSD is perpetuating systemic racism and violence that harms BIPOC youth, further contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **How Black Girls Are Drastically Impacted by The School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The body camera footage showing the arrest of six-year-old Kaia Rolle by two Orlando police officers captivated national headlines and received national condemnation. Young Rolle had thrown a tantrum earlier in the day, where she "kicked and punched three school employees, leading to her arrest on a charge of misdemeanor battery" (Toohey, 2020). However, by the time the police officers came to arrest her, she had calmed down. Initially, Rolle was unable to fathom what the police officers were doing to her, but after being handcuffed with zip ties, Rolle began to exclaim through her tears, "No, don't put handcuffs on! Help me, help me, please!" (Toohey, 2020). At the age of three, young Rolle learned how to speak and how to articulate her emotions, and at age six, she was castigated for expressing her emotions over what was bothering her. Instead of providing emotional support or addressing her behavioral issues by having her speak to a child psychologist, Rolle was sent to the Juvenile Assessment Center at just six years old. The traumatic experience of being arrested at

school will have a long-lasting impact on Rolle's feeling of safety and value within the institution of education. The Lucious and Emma Nixon Academy, where Rolle was a student, demonstrated a lack of care, love, compassion, and responsibility for Rolle's well-being. Unfortunately, what happened to Rolle is not unusual. Recurring physical assault, prosecution, and criminalization of young Black girls in schools is common, and the practice is rooted in racism and the belief that Black students are disposable.

Disproportionately penalizing Black girls disrupts their education and ability to succeed. In high school, Black female students are six times more likely to receive out of school suspensions than White female students, and they are three times more likely to be physically restrained (Bates, 2015). They are also four times more likely to be arrested and three times more likely to be referred to law enforcement (Bates, 2015). Black girls are overrepresented across the entire continuum of school discipline and continue to be referred to law enforcement instead of providing them with the care that they need. These statistics reveal that Black girls are treated as suspects. Black girls are not treated as just girls because no one takes the time to get to know them, they just automatically assumed to be up to no good. Once a girl is pushed out of school, she is pushed into the streets, into violence and trauma, and all other types of negative environments, which perpetuates a cycle of criminalization.

### **Zoom-to-Prison Pipeline**

Students of color live in a carceral state where institutions do not need physical school buildings to discipline and remove them from the classroom; thus, reforming the school-to-prison pipeline to the Zoom-to-prison pipeline. On August 27, 2020, the third day of distance learning at Grand Mountain School due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the vice-principal sent the police to the

home of 12-year-old Isaiah Elliot, who had been seen playing with a toy gun on-screen during his virtual art class. Upon seeing the alleged “gun,” Isaiah’s art teacher first emailed the vice-principal, telling him about what she had seen. Then she emailed Isaiah’s mother, Dani Elliot, telling her about what had happened. Moments later, the vice-principal called Elliot to inform her that a police officer was on their way to her residence. Despite her resistance to it, she had no say or control. When the police made it to Isaiah’s residence, they started investigating whether he had a gun or not. They found that the alleged “gun” was a toy with bright lime green with an orange tip color scheme and had the words “Zombie Hunter” written on its side (Peiser, 2020). Although he was in his own home during his virtual art class, Isaiah received a five-day suspension for bringing a “facsimile of a firearm to school” and at just 12-years-old, Isaiah now has a record with the El Paso County Sheriff’s Office (Budner, 2020). After viewing the classes’ recording, it was clear that Isaiah was playing with his toy gun by placing it on his sides. Isaiah did not point the toy gun at another person as alleged. Though Dani Elliot and her husband spoke with the principal, vice-principal, and superintendent about dropping these charges, they did not change their decision. Later, the school district gave a statement claiming, “We never have or ever will condone any form of racism or discrimination... Safety will always be number one for our students and staff. We follow board policies and safety protocols consistently, whether we are in-person or distance learning” (Peiser, 2020). The school did not handle the situation adequately because the art teacher failed to inform authorities that Isaiah had A.D.H.D. The vice-principal also called the police before informing Isaiah’s parents. Despite the school’s claim that they care about their students’ safety, they put Isaiah’s life in jeopardy.



when they called the police before informing his parents about the situation, and they harmed his future by not dropping the charges and removing this incident from his record.

This incident proves that people do not see Black youth's humanity and that they criminalize them for behavioral problems. Black youth are unable to show their full range of emotions without facing criminalization. Although people advocate for social and emotional learning, it is evident that there is no social and emotional learning for Black children after time and time again. Black students cannot speak about or express their pain and trauma to heal and reach for joy. Schools continue to murder their student's spirits, which is "the denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and multiple structures of racism" (Love, 2013). This incident in online schooling proves that BIPOC youth will continue to be criminalized no matter the setting.

### **Effects of School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The clause "separate but equal" never became the truth because inequity continues to be a problem in education. The Black and White achievement gap constantly increased throughout history and continues to grow to this day. Experts believe there may be two reasons for this gap: the perpetuation of the stereotype that Black and Brown youth are not as intelligent as White youth, and the country, with its long history of a racial caste, is simply remaking that racial caste in our schools. Some individuals may claim that Black and Brown youth have not achieved a lot because they are incompetent, but in reality, this gap can be attributed to educational injustices. Dropout rates are high amongst BIPOC youth, but they are high not because students do not care about school. Instead, these statistics are high

because the environments they are placed in and the way they are treated pushes them out of the classroom.

### **The Call for Change**

Many talk about school funding, yet people are unwilling to talk about what is equitable. Although many teachers and school administrators have stated that they support the Black Lives Matter movement, many are still unwilling to defund police in schools. People continue to argue that police deter crime and that they can prevent atrocities, such as school shootings from occurring. However, it is evident that these statistics support the unjust notion of biased and racist ideologies. Despite feeling outraged when a Black person is murdered by the police in the streets and standing in solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement, some educators engage in the systemic issue of policing within their classrooms. Many educators continue to uphold the teacher-to-student power dynamic and discipline or remove students from their classrooms for behavioral issues, such as when students neglect to pay attention or complete in-class work. Students are also penalized for not completing their homework and are reprimanded for being late to class. Students go through issues and react in various ways, and although these actions can come off as intentional, they are not. Educators should not take misbehavior personally. Instead of removing students from the classroom when they are non-compliant or negligent, educators should check in with students and try to understand where they are coming from. When students get into trouble, they are either sent to the office to speak to an SRO, or an SRO will go into the classroom and remove them. Educators continue to overlook their students and neglect their existence. They fail to recognize when their students are going through hard times and fail to connect with them, and they remove them from the

classroom. Educators must change these habits and humanize their students and establish a relationship with them.

People continue to argue to keep police in schools, but there is no evidence that helps support the notion that police help deter crimes, such as school shootings. The shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, and the shooting at Santa Fe High School in Santa Fe, Texas, among a few, caused an outcry for instilling more police officers in schools. Public officials, school administrators, teachers, and parents argued that police officers would prevent these atrocities from occurring, but evidence shows that SROs cannot prevent these atrocities. During the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, the SRO remained outside of the school in a defensive position while 17 students and teachers were shot and killed and 17 were injured (Burch & Blinder, 2019, p. 1). Time and time again, SROs prove themselves ineffective in emergency situations. There is no data to support the belief that police in schools improve student safety, educational outcomes, or mental health. However, data shows that mental health resources are largely underfunded in comparison to police presence in schools. Approximately, there are 1.7 million students in 10 schools have cops but no counselors. Currently, New Hampshire, Montana, and Vermont are the only three states in the nation that meet the U.S. Department of Education's recommendation of a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1 (Bray, 2019). This means that the majority of students in the United States of America are overlooked and never received the adequate mental health help they need. According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the suicide rate among children ages 10 to 17 increased by 70% from 2010 to 2016 (C.D.C., 2018). It is also likely that "approximately 72% of children living in the

United States will experience at least one major stressful event, such as witnessing violence, experiencing abuse, or experiencing the loss of a loved one before the age of 18” (Nelson, 2020). Schools allocate most of their funding towards SRO programs and deprive students of the help they need, such as the mental health resources that they desperately require to prevent incidents such as school shootings from occurring in the first place. The glaring lack of mental health resources in comparison to police presence in schools is outright unjust. The reason students are not receiving the mental health resources that they need is that schools claim that there is merely “not enough” funding for them. However, there will be more than enough funding when SRO programs are abolished.

It is imperative to reallocate funding into education, not policing. Investing in policing internalizes racism and causes students to feel that they are being criminalized rather than encouraged to learn. Policing is invasive as it keeps students under constant surveillance like they would be if they were in prison. SROs contribute to the trauma that students face outside of school and create a toxic school culture where students cannot learn and thrive. Though people claim that SRO's and police officers are good people, their job is to discipline and arrest students. SROs are ill-equipped to deal with emotional and behavioral problems at their root. Policing in schools does not serve any purpose. Their establishment was conveyed as beneficial, but they only exacerbate the mass incarceration problem. Defunding the police and SRO programs and reallocating that funding towards much-needed resources would allow students to thrive and flourish. Over the past three decades, every state in the United States has increased its spending on corrections rather than education (State and Local Expenditures on Correction and Education, 2016).

Approximately, “per-student spending on education at the state and local levels has decreased by 28%, whereas spending on corrections has increased by 44%” (%)” (Expenditures on Correction and Education, 2016). Based on the data, it is evident that the criminal justice system is prioritized more than education. Schools have no problem cutting educational resources and spend millions on SRO programs each year. More than two-thirds of high school students attend a school with a police officer present (Lindsay, 2018). High school students have more SRO's than guidance counselors, which is problematic because students have less help and guidance about continuing their education. Teachers, counselors, psychologists, nurses, and social workers belong in schools; the police do not. BIPOC students deserve to be treated ethically and valued for their humanity, not policed and criminalized.

There are millions of Black and Brown youth with potential, agency, and intelligence, but they are often overlooked. Education is the key to success as it serves as a hope for the entry of the poor and oppressed into mainstream American society, which is why our youth deserve a quality education and to succeed. However, in order to provide a good education to these youth, the way the school system currently operates needs to change. People look at BIPOC youth and think of them in a certain way, but they should be able to speak their minds and express their emotions without preconceived judgements. BIPOC youth deserve the right to a quality education, but they are continuously left out or kicked out of the classroom. These conditions make them believe that nobody cares or loves them. Youth want to learn, but they must be provided with the adequate conditions to learn. People do not see the pain of BIPOC youth or understand that it is affecting their ability to learn; they only see challenging behavior. The school

system must be rebuilt to ensure that it does not reinforce the status quo of inequality and criminalization. BIPOC youth must be seen for their full potential because they are capable, strong, vulnerable, and worth protecting. Learning and developing should be the main objective in school. Structures in the school that perpetuate criminalization should be dismantled because BIPOC youth should not have to be pushed into the criminal justice system for making an adolescent mistake.

### **Conclusion**

Removing police in schools is a step towards liberation for Black, Brown, and Indigenous students. Police officers patrolling school hallways and surveilling students through cameras inadvertently mimic prison environments. Therefore, students' ability to thrive and learn in school is hindered. Schools should become locations for healing so that they can become locations of learning. Students should feel joy, safety, love, and a sense of belonging in the classroom. Students should not be pushed out of education and punished as criminals for behavioral issues. Removing the police from schools will allow for the reallocation of funding towards much-needed resources. These resources include hiring more counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, and even reducing classroom sizes. With these resources in place, students can re-engage with education and see themselves in political, intellectual, and creative spaces. This is all essential to providing a safe and effective school environment for students to thrive.

Fighting injustice within schools and communities is essential to centering BIPOC youth. Perpetuating systems of oppression and false narratives in education hurts BIPOC youth and prevents them from excelling. Stating that Black lives matter is merely not enough. To embody the spirit of the Black Lives Matter

movement, educators must have a deep understanding that Black and Brown lives “mattering” is not a trend. Therefore, there is still a need to strive for real changes that positively impact communities of color. Having a radical imagination, centering vulnerable communities, and seeing and loving BIPOC is an act of political resistance. By removing police officers from schools, they will reinvent themselves to become safe havens that allow students to gain a sense of belonging. A school should be a home—a place where students can embrace who they are and where they come from, further allowing them to develop integrated academic and cultural identities. It is also imperative that students feel that they matter, are supported, valued, and reminded that their dreams matter and that their voices have power. With smaller classroom sizes, educators will build personal relationships with their students and make sure that each voice in their classroom is heard. The educational system needs to be redesigned to become a home for BIPOC youth, a space that loves them, takes care of them, nurtures them, and gives them dignity. Education ought to revolve around healing, joy, and community; it must resist punitive approaches such as policing in schools.

The dominant White community needs to step up and help dismantle systems of oppression that benefit them while harming others. White people must see people of color beyond their pain and build towards a world that understands, knows, and loves people of color: a movement towards the liberation of the oppressed. White people must learn to use their unearned privilege to fight for another person’s justice. Allyship works towards a common goal that is beneficial to everyone, but it is usually performative. Although allies are knowledgeable about issues, they do not have to question their privilege or decenter their voices, take risks, or stand in solidarity with others. Allyship does

not question Whiteness. Allyship must be developed into something more substantial; allies must become co-conspirators. A co-conspirator is not afraid to put something on the line or take a risk, even something small, for someone else's justice. Co-conspirators understand their privilege, their relation to systems of oppression, how Whiteness functions in society, and unlearn habits that uphold those systems so that they can use their intersections of privilege and leverage their power to oppression (Love, 2019, p. 117). "A co-conspirator functions as a verb, not a noun" (Love, 2019, p. 117). This means that White people must call out racism and organize against all systems of oppression. Although this work mainly lies on the shoulders of White people—since they inherit the most privilege—men, heterosexuals, able-bodied individuals, the wealthy, those with U.S. citizenship, and Christians must also use their privilege to remove oppression from its roots and create change. People with privilege shall work towards eliminating models that are detrimental to BIPOC youth.

In the words of Bettina Love, "There is only one choice: become an abolitionist parent, teacher, doctor, sanitation worker, lawyer, C.E.O., accountant, community activist, small business owner, scientist, engineer, and human" (Love, 2019, p. 162). The work towards abolition and liberation cannot be done in isolation as it requires solidarity from co-conspirators to collectivize, organize, and strategize effectively. Not only to abolish and dismantle all forms of oppression that continue to harm BIPOC every day but imagine and build new possibilities of liberating education that is about thriving collectively. Creating a just and equitable world is about abolishing systems of oppression and building new ones. School districts across the nation must eradicate their contracts with their local police departments and



abolish SRO programs to provide an adequate learning environment for students, which is a step towards creating a liberating and just society for all.

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*Brenda Vargas Tapia is a first-generation student majoring in Political Science and minoring in Chicana/o Studies. She is interested in how the U.S has used the law to address issues of racial injustice in the past and present. She is also keen on understanding how legal choices have influenced past and current national and state political structures. As an advocate for social justice, Brenda is committed towards helping dismantle forms of oppression that harm Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities by looking for ways to resolve the issues that impact them.*